

1926



Is all well?

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interested in municipal welfare. Over five hundred towns in England have appointed such commissions; there are many in Canada and the United States; and their usefulness has been well determined.

We would seriously suggest that at least one member of the Commission should be a woman. Women like Mrs. Barnett and Miss Octavia Hill have been leaders in housing reform, and women's wisdom and intuition are greatly needed in dealing with the social problems which affect them and their households so closely.

### THE FUNCTIONS OF A TOWN-PLANNING COMMISSION

If a Town-planning Commission is appointed some will ask "Just what will it do, and how will it set about to solve the housing problem?"

The very first requisite of such a Commission is to gain as thorough a knowledge as possible of existing conditions. St. John's is a step ahead of most of the cities on the North American continent in that it has a map already prepared which shows with fair accuracy the location of all buildings. But this plan or map is still incomplete, because, though it is possible by the scale of the map to gain some idea of the relation of any one point to any other point in a horizontal plane, there is nothing to indicate the relation of those points as regards elevation above sea level or any other fixed datum. A topographical map shows the relief on the earth's surface by means of contour lines, which are lines drawn upon the map through all points represented that are of certain equal heights above sea level. In a city built on such a hilly site as St. John's, a well-prepared topographical map is the first essential for town planning, as grades must be carefully considered in planning streets and sewers.

It will take some time to complete such a map for the whole city area, but the areas most needing investigation can be done first, provided, of course, that a proper system of base or triangulation lines is laid down by a competent engineer. The detail work within the areas can readily be done by the junior staff of the city engineer's department.

With such a map before them the members of the Town-planning Commission would consider what areas in the city are most suitable and available for building development, having regard to the facilities for access, for water supply and sewerage. This would, of course, involve some study of the water and sewer system, but, as before stated, such detailed studies are the function of the duly-appointed municipal officers. It will depend upon the report of such officers as to whether the Commission recommends a site or not. Sites that are quite unsuitable for building development should be proscribed and building prohibited, and every effort made to develop and make available for building those sites that are easy of access, and have facilities for sanitary services.

A study of the plan will show that in the older and congested areas there are streets that should be either extended, diverted or

widened, to facilitate traffic, to act as firebreaks, or to open out property for building development. Plans will then be made for such street widening or street extension, not, of course, with the idea of having all such plans immediately carried out; they will be carried out just as opportunities occur and as funds permit. But, having made the plans, it will be impossible to have buildings erected just where streets should go through, and when old buildings have to be replaced they will have to be rebuilt to a new street line.

The Municipal Council has powers to deal with unhealthy areas and, in extreme cases, may have to exercise such powers. It is, however, often found that when a Town-planning Commission is appointed, and draws up a scheme for the improvement of any defective area, property owners will co-operate to get the scheme carried through, because they realize that the improvement means an enhanced value of the property and greater revenue both for owner and municipality.

One of the first duties of the Town-planning Commission would be to press for powers to control adequately the Crown lands at the eastern end of the Harbour and on the South side. The urgency of this was noted by those who drafted the Municipal Act, but years have passed without any definite understanding of the rights of the city in this regard.

There can be no healthy community development, no building up of a city worth while, if at its very portals there are areas which may be classed as "No Man's Land," areas where municipal authority is flouted, where sanitary conditions prevail that menace the welfare not only of the inhabitants of the city, but of its visitors. Some of the land in this area has possibilities of development for purposes of pleasure that many cities would envy, but there is great danger that unless prompt measures are taken it may be a very serious blot on a fine landscape. The powers given the city under the Municipal Act to control the development within one mile of the city limits must also be exercised if future trouble, greater than the present trouble, is to be avoided. Just as soon as sanitary regulations are enforced within the city limits there will be a migration of those that despise such regulations to the borders of the city. The city boundary is an imaginary line mainly devised for political purposes. It is no barrier to disease or social evils, and it should be impossible for people to live under unsanitary conditions and to transgress sanitary laws, simply because they choose to dwell on another side of an imaginary line.

### ZONING FOR HOME PROTECTION

It is generally found that when the Town-planning Commission and the municipal authority begin to plan ahead for development, house building is stimulated. There is no encouragement to build decent houses if on all sides they are surrounded by dilapidated property occupied by careless and thriftless tenants. But the opening of a new street, or the widening of an existing street, gives the property owner the chance to make some better use of his land, to erect a larger or better house than formerly, and so obtain a better class of tenant.

Such new developments must be protected against depreciation by the intrusion of factories or noxious industries, stables or commercial garages. The most progressive cities have now put into force zoning regulations, and divide the city into districts for residential, business and industrial purposes, and so maintain property values against depreciation. The home of the poorest citizen is entitled to the same protection as that of the wealthiest.

### HOW CAN HOUSES BE BUILT?

There is nothing exceptional in the fact that in St. John's private enterprise will not now provide homes suitable for the poorer classes of the community. For many years, Great Britain has had to provide under municipal authority and with the aid of government funds, houses for its poorest citizens. The wealthy state of New York is now considering by what means it can best aid in building homes for the poorer classes. (See Appendix, page 22.) The Dominion Government of Canada has loaned money for house building; most of the Provincial governments there, and many municipal governments have done the same thing.

Here, again, those responsible for the drafting of the Municipal Act of St. John's saw the need which has grown greater each succeeding year. By Section 88 of the act the Municipal Council has power to build houses, to guarantee the securities of Building Societies, or to bonus the building of houses of moderate value.

The Town-planning Commission would give serious thought to the best methods to stimulate house building. Our observation leads us to the conclusion that there are in St. John's thrifty citizens who with a little encouragement would build houses for themselves, but are handicapped by small capital, and the high charges for mortgages with small security. It is many of this type that have built their homes in the outer areas of the city, but under the tremendous disadvantage of lack of public water supply and sewers, a great distance from work and school, and no protection from fire.

Employers of labor can render great public service and encourage a better understanding between classes if they will assist their employees to establish their own homes. In Birmingham, England, a company had been formed to allow a second mortgage for as much as thirty per cent. on the cost, mainly on the security of the man's character, and especially the employer's report of his value, obtaining where possible some collateral security such as a life policy. By this organization, 245 persons have already benefited. Home owning and house building encourage and stimulate general business as hardly anything else does, and the most prosperous and contented communities are generally found where home owning prevails. Where individual employers cannot meet the problem for their own employees they can often combine with others at least partially to meet the problem. Returns for such investments which, if they cannot be measured in terms of dollars, are, nevertheless, very valuable, are contented labor, a more vital interest in community welfare and prosperous industry.

It is idle to urge that these suggestions cannot be carried out in St. John's because they have not been done before, or that they have been tried and have not been the success anticipated. Many of the suggestions here made have been carried out in other places with marked success. Newfoundland has the opportunity to benefit by the experience gained by many other countries during the work of reconstruction after the war.

We do not hesitate to urge that the citizens ask the government of the Dominion to consider this question as a national problem.

#### A NATIONAL NOT A LOCAL PROBLEM

The proper housing and settlement of people in a country is as vital and important a question as any for a government to consider. In the St. John's Electoral Districts, over one-fifth of the population of the Dominion is settled, and probably the *per capita* contribution to the finances of the government is greater in this area than in any other. But vital statistics clearly show that the general and infantile mortality rates are greater in this area than in other parts of the Dominion. Surely this fact alone is sufficient reason for investigation. But the conditions now found in the St. John's districts may some day be found on a smaller scale, but in proportion equally serious, among other communities in Newfoundland. Is it not wise to take the obvious lesson from this example, and prevent the repetition of the same evils elsewhere? The unsatisfactory settlement of population outside the former city limits of St. John's is one for which the municipal authority is not responsible. But to-day they are asked to face the consequences of lack of control. Other municipalities may be in the same position in the course of time.

It is very desirable and proper to develop natural resources and to secure and encourage new industries. The primary object in doing this should be to improve the conditions of life for all the people, not to promote opportunities for the gaining of profit by a few. In many countries the opening up of new mining areas, or the establishment of new industries has meant intolerable housing conditions, epidemics of dangerous diseases, a great increase in crime and social strife. Much of this might have been prevented if governments had been prepared beforehand with proper policies for the housing and settlement of people in new areas. Town-planning is now compulsory in England because the authorities realize that satisfactory housing of the common people is impossible if things are left to chance. Is there any probability that chance development in Newfoundland will work out any better than it did in England?

#### IF GOVERNMENT AID IS REFUSED

But even if the government of the Dominion refuses any aid, is there not sufficient pride, sufficient public spirit among the citizens of St. John's to at least make a start to tackle the problem within their own boundary? When one contemplates the splendid churches, the

fine educational establishments in the city, the War Memorial, Bowring Park, the monuments to the city's heroes and heroines, one feels that the citizens who have made these possible, can, if they so determine, see that social justice is done to the poor and unfortunate and make it possible for them to live under better conditions. To quote Dr. Osler:

The outlook for the world has never been so hopeful. There is no place for despondency or despair. As for the dour dyspeptics in mind and morals who sit idly croaking like ravens—let them come into the arena, let them wrestle for their flesh and blood against the principalities and powers represented by bad air and worse houses, by drink and disease, by needless pain, and by the loss annually to the state of thousands of valuable lives—let them fight for the day when a man's life shall be more precious than gold. Now, alas! the cheapness of life is every day's tragedy!

But let us not forget that the health of a city demands more self denial, and more intelligence in personal conduct, than have been called for ever before. The crown of health cannot be won solely by scientific devices or government authority. We must give thought to our relations to our fellow man, we need to be more persistently considerate of others.

Let our faith be, that, if we so determine, we can make the city of St. John's, not only a place where improved physical health is easily possible, but also, as a necessary corollary, a place where greater happiness and social contentment will be found.

Let us work for an approach to the glorious day of which Shelley sings so rapturously:

. . . Happiness  
And Science dawn though late upon the earth;  
Peace cheers the mind, health renovates the frame;  
Disease and pleasure cease to mingle here,  
Reason and passion cease to combat there,  
Whilst mind unfettered o'er the earth extends  
Its all subduing energies, and wields  
The sceptre of a vast dominion there.

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November 23rd, 1926.

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